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SUBJECT: BRIAN COWEN BECOMES PRIME MINISTER OF IRELAND;
CABINET CHANGES BROADER THAN EXPECTED

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Summary: Brian Cowen Becomes Prime Minister

¶1. (SBU) During the afternoon of May 7, the lower house of the Irish Parliament (Dail) elected Fianna Fail leader Brian Cowen as Prime Minister (Taoiseach) of Ireland (reftel). Following his investiture by Irish President Mary McAleese, Cowen announced that his first task would be to ensure ratification of the EU Lisbon Treaty. Cowen's first act as Prime Minister, however, was to name a new government. While Cowen's Cabinet changes were more extensive than expected, members of the previous Cabinet have been largely shuffled around rather than moved out. Fianna Fail's coalition partnership remains solid; all coalition Ministers were retained. While there will inevitably be some tweaks to Irish Government policy, we do not expect substantive change. A summary of Cowen's Cabinet reshuffle follows. End summary.

Brian Lenihan - Moving Up

¶2. (U) Brian Lenihan, Fianna Fail, has been appointed Minister for Finance. Formerly Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform (but holding a Cabinet-level portfolio for less than a year), Lenihan's promotion to the portfolio (vacated by Prime Minister Cowen) over more established rivals Micheal Martin and Dermot Ahern was something of a surprise. The Finance Minister position is widely regarded as the second most powerful portfolio in the Cabinet, after the Prime Minister. Lenihan has been a strong ally of Cowen. He was the first Minister to rule himself out as a contender for leadership of Fianna Fail when former Prime Minister Bertie Ahern announced his resignation in April 2008.

¶3. (U) Lenihan represents the Dublin West constituency. Following the general election in 2002, Lenihan was appointed Minister of State, with special responsibility for Children, at the Department of Health and Children, the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, and the Department of Education and Science. He was appointed Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform by former Prime Minister Bertie Ahern in June 2007. Lenihan is a member of an Irish political dynasty. His father, Brian Lenihan, was a former Deputy Prime Minister and Cabinet Minister for over 25 years. His aunt is Mary O'Rourke, a Member of the Dail for 20 years and former leader of the Irish Senate. His brother, Conor,

is also a Junior Minister. Lenihan performed strongly and calmly in the difficult position of Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform. Colleagues view him as an authoritative person who is a potential future leader of Fianna Fail.

Mary Coughlan - Moving Up

¶4. (U) Mary Coughlan, Deputy Prime Minister (Tanaiste) and Minister for Enterprise, Trade, and Employment; Fianna Fail. Formerly Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, Coughlan was elevated to the number two political slot and given a more powerful Department. She is a confidant of Cowen and the first woman Deputy Prime Minister from Fianna Fail.

¶5. (U) Coughlan has been a member of the Dail since 1987; at 21 years of age when she was first elected, she was the Dail's youngest ever member. Representing Donegal Southwest, a border constituency on the far western seaboard, and as a young mother, Coughlan's political interests include agriculture and marine matters, Northern Ireland, the Irish language, and child-care issues. A social worker before entering politics, Coughlan won the Dail seat once held by her father, Cathal, and late uncle, Clement. She is regarded as politically cautious and conservative on social issues. Coughlan participated in a USG International Visitor Leadership Program on U.S. Presidential elections in 1988.

Batt O'Keefe - Moving Up

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¶6. (U) Batt O'Keefe, Minister for Education and Science; Fianna Fail. Formerly Junior Minister for Housing, Urban Renewal and Developing Areas in the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, O'Keefe has risen to a full cabinet position, perhaps the biggest surprise of the Cabinet reshuffle.

¶7. (U) Representing the Cork Northwest constituency, O'Keefe served in the Dail from 1987-1989 and 1992-present. Before becoming involved in politics, he was a lecturer at the Cork Institute of Technology. He is the holder of three Munster Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) medals with Cork at Under 21, Junior, and Senior level. He was also a Cork Intermediate Handball Champion.

Brendan Smith - Moving Up

¶8. (U) Brendan Smith, Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food; Fianna Fail. Formerly Junior Minister for Children and Youth Affairs in the Department of Health and Children, Smith has risen to a full cabinet position. His appointment to Cabinet was widely expected.

¶9. (U) Representing the Caven-Monaghan constituency, a border area, Smith was first elected to the Dail in 1992, replacing the former Deputy Prime Minister John Wilson. He has served as Government Whip on the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and acted as Co-Chairman of the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body.

Pat Carey - Moving Up

¶10. (U) Pat Carey, Chief Whip; Fianna Fail. Formerly Junior Minister for Drugs Strategy and Community Affairs in the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht, Carey has been

elevated to a more senior position, which carries with it a seat, though not a vote, in Cabinet meetings.

¶11. (U) Representing the Dublin Northwest constituency, Carey was first elected to the Dail in 1997. He was formerly an elementary school teacher and vice-principal. Despite being a backbencher for much of his career, Carey has had a high profile and has a strong media persona. He was a member of a delegation from the Foreign Affairs Committee that visited Israel and Palestine in January 2005. During a meeting of the Human Rights sub-committee on March 9, 2006, he said of the visit, "To my dying day, nothing will replace the horror I felt during our visit to areas of Palestine."

Barry Andrews - Moving Up

¶12. (U) Barry Andrews, Minister of State for Children and Youth Affairs in the Department of Health and Children; Fianna Fail. Plucked from the backbench, the selection of Andrews came as a surprise to many. He will have a seat, though not a vote, in Cabinet meetings.

¶13. (U) Representing the Dun Laoghaire constituency, Andrews was first elected to the Dail in 2002. He is the son of David Andrews, who was a Member of the Dail from 1965-2002 and Minister of Foreign Affairs twice in the 1990s. His cousin, Chris Andrews, is also a Member of the Dail. Andrews was formerly a barrister and teacher.

Michael Martin - Moving Up

¶14. (U) Michael Martin, Minister for Foreign Affairs; Fianna Fail. Formerly Minister for Enterprise, Trade, and Employment, Martin has moved up a notch, though some observers see this as a sideways move. Since the May 2007 general election, Martin is said to have aligned himself closely with Cowen. Cowen reportedly sees Martin and new Minister for Finance Brian Lenihan as his "go to" guys. Martin will lead government efforts on the Lisbon Treaty referendum. Following that, his biggest challenge will be to make use his position as Foreign Minister to demonstrate his political gravitas.

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¶15. (U) Representing the Cork South-Central constituency in the Dail since 1989, Martin is regarded as a prospective future Prime Minister. He held the post of Minister for Health and Children from January 2000 to September 2004 before serving as Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment. In 2004, he received international acclaim for pushing through Ireland's ban on smoking in all enclosed spaces, including pubs. In 2005, however, he was criticized for failing to stop the imposition of illegal nursing home charges on the elderly while he was Health Minister. As Minister for Education from 1997-2000, Martin was credited with introducing key education reforms. A former secondary school teacher, he is highly regarded on all sides of the Dail.

Dermot Ahern - Moving Sideways

¶16. (U) Dermot Ahern, Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform; Fianna Fail. Formerly Minister for Foreign Affairs, this move is definitely sideways, though to a powerful Department. Many observers had expected Ahern to move from Foreign Affairs after holding that position almost four years (exceeding the normal tenure for an Irish Foreign Minister). Closely aligned with Former Taoiseach Bertie Ahern (no relation), Ahern has made no secret of his ambition to become

Prime Minister.

¶17. (U) Representing the Louth constituency, Ahern is regarded as a prospective future Prime Minister. He has served in numerous senior government positions and was regarded as an effective and high-profile Foreign Affairs Minister. Ahern has played a dominant role in Northern Ireland affairs; his upbringing in a border county (Louth) giving him insights into the peace process. In November 2004, United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan appointed Ahern as the European envoy to facilitate an overall UN reform package. In this capacity Ahern met with the foreign ministers of 45 countries. He has been outspoken on the Irish policy of Active Neutrality - a non-aligned Ireland acting as a bridge between the developed and developing world) and has stepped forward as a world leader in international conflicts and disasters. Ahern participated in a USG International Visitor Leadership Program for young European leaders in 1989.

¶18. (SBU) Comment: At the time of former Prime Minister Bertie Ahern's resignation, Micheal Martin and Dermot Ahern were regarded as Cowen's two main rivals for leadership of Fianna Fail. Cowen chose neither for the powerful Department of Finance position. End comment.

No Change

¶19. (U) Eamon Ryan, Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources; Green Party; representing the Dublin South constituency.

¶20. (U) John Gormley, Minister for Environment, Heritage and Local Government; Green Party; representing the Dublin Southeast constituency.

¶21. (U) Mary Harney, Minister for Health and Children; Progressive Democrats; representing the Dublin Mid-West constituency. Harney participated in a USG International Visitor Leadership Program on an individual program in 1985.

¶22. (U) Eamon O Cuiv, Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs; Fianna Fail; representing the Galway West constituency.

¶23. (U) Willie O'Dea, Minister for Defence; Fianna Fail; representing the Limerick East constituency.

¶24. (U) Noel Dempsey, Minister for Transport and the Marine; Fianna Fail; representing the Meath West constituency.

¶25. (U) Trevor Sargent, Minister of State for Agriculture; Green Party; representing the Dublin North constituency.

¶26. (U) Dick Roche, Minister of State for European Affairs; Fianna Fail; representing the Wicklow constituency. Roche will be instrumental in the campaign to pass the referendum

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on the EU Lisbon Treaty.

Moving Down or Out

¶27. (U) Mary Hanafin, Minister for Social and Family Affairs; Fianna Fail; representing the Dun Laoghaire constituency. Formerly Minister for Education and Science, this appointment to a less powerful and prestigious Department is widely seen as Cowen's biggest demotion. Hanafin immediately, staunchly and publicly declared that she was happy with the change.

¶28. (U) Martin Cullen, Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism;

Fianna Fail; representing the Waterford constituency. Formerly, Minister for Social and Family Affairs, the move to a less powerful and prestigious Department is widely seen as a demotion. Cullen has made no public comment on his new appointment.

¶29. (U) Seamus Brennan; Fianna Fail; representing the Dublin South constituency. Brennan, who announced on May 7 that he would retire from his Ministerial appointment for health and family reasons, is widely viewed as having been forced out. He becomes a backbencher.

¶30. (U) Tom Kitt; Fianna Fail; representing the Dublin South constituency. Formerly the Chief Whip, Kitt, in a surprise move, is now out of the Cabinet and becomes a backbencher. Kitt reportedly turned down an offer of a junior ministerial appointment and immediately announced that he will not run for the Dail again in the next general election, scheduled for 2011.

Comment

¶31. (SBU) While Cowen's Cabinet changes were more extensive than expected, the faces in the Cabinet haven't changed all that much. Potential future Fianna Fail leaders - Micheal Martin, Dermot Ahern, Brian Lenihan, and Mary Coughlan - all retained powerful Departments. It is noteworthy that Cowen elevated Mary Coughlan to become the most powerful female politician in Ireland. It is also worthy of note that the Cabinet portfolios of Fianna Fail's indispensable Green Party and Progressive Democrats coalition partners - Mary Harney, Eamon Ryan, and John Gormley - went untouched, in part, no doubt, because of Cowen's role as architect of the original Fianna Fail/Green/Progressive Democrats coalition line-up last spring. It was clear that Cowen made the appointments with an eye to regional distribution. In fact, one political commentator declared that the "Culchies" (an Irish term meaning "country bumpkin" or "proud of my roots" depending on where one calls home) had come to town. However, there could be storm clouds on the distant horizon - if Kitt and Brennan both leave government in 2011, Fianna Fail will have lost two party members who have anchored the party's success in the highly influential Dublin South constituency for 25 years. While there will inevitably be some tweaks to Irish Government policy in coming days, we do not expect substantive change.
FOLEY